

## Civil War Book Review

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### Same Story, Different Perspective: A View From Inside The 'Cheesebox On A Raft'

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## Review

### SAME STORY, DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

#### A view from inside the 'Cheesebox on a Raft'

O'Connor, E. Rory

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**Mariners' Museum, Davis, William C., and Geer, George S..** *The Monitor Chronicles: One Sailor's Account*. Simon & Schuster Books, 2000-06-01. ISBN 684869977

**The *Monitor Chronicles*** does not examine the life of "common" sailors, a prominent genre in Civil War literature. Instead, the Mariner's Museum in Newport News, Virginia, enlisted William Marvel to edit and place in historical context the letters of George S. Geer, a member of the ironclad's crew. The resulting book details the life of one man who stood apart from the rest of the crew and represented the new breed of sailor needed to operate modern warships.

Geer joined the navy not for ideological reasons but to learn a trade and support his family. At the time of Geer's enlistment, the navy was desperately short of men. Recruiters promised potential sailors more than the government could provide, thus enticing men to sign up. Geer was one of the many men suckered into sea service by this ploy.

Soon after he entered the navy, Geer volunteered for duty aboard the U.S.S. *Monitor*. Because of time spent working in his father's stove foundry, Geer was taken on as a first-class fireman. Three weeks after he enlisted in 1862, Geer took part in the famous contest between the *Monitor* and the Confederate ironclad C.S.S. *Virginia*. Geer wrote little about this contest and therefore Marvel briefly summarizes the clash in the first chapter.

After the duel, the *Monitor* mostly rode her anchor on Virginia's James River. The ship protected General George McClellan's lines of communication and potential evacuation route between the Peninsula and Washington, D.C., from the *Virginia* and her smaller sister ship, the *Richmond*. With the exception

of an artillery duel with batteries atop Drewry's Bluff and the shelling of a plantation or two, the *Monitor's* guns remained silent. Geer wrote to his wife twice a week, offering a window into his life aboard the vessel.

Like many Civil War sailors, Geer was a "landlubber" before enlisting, but in other respects he stood out from the rest of the crew. He was a member of the secret society of Masons, and the resulting ties possibly assisted him in receiving a promotion to yeoman. Geer also personally associated with some of the *Monitor's* officers, a most uncommon occurrence for enlisted sailors. Geer had his own cabin and his sole responsibility aboard the *Monitor* was to hand out tools as they were needed - quite a comfortable job. He was xenophobic and more at ease alone than among the many Irish and English immigrants in the *Monitor's* enlisted crew. Geer also aspired to an engineer commission, an appointment that he received shortly after the *Monitor* sank. For all these reasons, **The *Monitor* Chronicles** highlights one unique man's experiences that were far from typical of crewmen.

The Civil War prompted revolutionary advances in naval design. Wind permanently gave way to steam propulsion, and ship designs reflected this fundamental change. The *Monitor* broke with many naval traditions. Its crew berth was in the aft portion of the vessel with the captain's quarters forward. This configuration was opposite to naval norms and represents one of many examples of how the launching of the ironclad upended established naval practices. The navy needed technically-trained and -minded men like Geer to keep such modern ships in fighting trim. Custom-bound, the navy loathed the idea of parity between deck officers and engineers, but was forced to acknowledge that innovative systems and weapons called for a new breed of sailor. Although Marvel discusses technological developments, he could have done more to establish Geer's participation in this transformation in naval warfare while aboard the *Monitor*.

As the main repository of *Monitor* artifacts, the Mariner's Museum is instrumental in salvaging the *Monitor's* innovative engine and turret, a preservation effort detailed in the last chapter. Drawings and color photos allow the reader to see the ship as she looks today, while also documenting the *Monitor's* rapidly deteriorating condition.

Marvel successfully conveys what life was like for Geer aboard the *Monitor*. However, he has a penchant for repetition that is seen in his use of identical

quotations multiple times to make the same point. For people already knowledgeable about the *Monitor's* story, this book may not have much to offer. However, for those beginning to read on the *Monitor* or who want to learn what life was like on this fabled vessel, **The *Monitor* Chronicles** is worth a look.

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